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Honoring Virginia Tech: Letter from Charles (Jack) Dudley

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Virginia Tech

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Honoring Virginia Tech



CHARLES (JACK) DUDLEY

Letter from Charles (Jack) Dudley

VIRGINIA TECH UNIVERSITY

April 25, 2007

To Honors People Everywhere:

Your cards, letters, emails, and phone calls helped sustain us in the most terrible moments of our lives and for that we are forever in your debt. For the period Monday through today (April 16–25th), we have lived through periods of uncertainty, grief, intense emotions, and a profound sense of loss. We lost thirty-three students, our sense of security, and sense of direction. Your concern, as evidenced by more than two hundred communications, provided islands of comfort in a sea of horror. For your thoughtfulness we say a humble thank you.

With a heavy heart and more questions than answers, I write to provide some comment concerning the events of April 16 at Virginia Tech. At this early date, we don't pretend to understand the senseless loss of life, so insight and understanding will have to wait. I have copied to this letter an editorial I wrote for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* on Sunday.

Honors had an early warning of the extent of the disaster. Michelle Wooddell, the office manager, is the wife of one of the police officers to first enter the scene. We heard that at least twenty students were injured. As the day progressed, the number would continue to climb. We began to check on students in Honors and most of the day was spent fearfully seeking information. We learned (about three in the afternoon) that all of the Hillcrest House students were accounted for. There were four from Main Campbell House still missing. Two were found late at night and safe. Two others, Leslie Sherman and Heidi Miller, were still missing. We feared the worst. Late that night, Terry Papillon, faculty preceptor for Honors, found Heidi in the local hospital. She was wounded but in stable condition. The next day we learned that Leslie died of her wounds. We also learned that Shelley Turner and Austin Cloyd were dead.

Four young women in Honors had experienced horror of that day, and three did not survive. They were students of the first order. Leslie was a founding member of the Main Campbell Honors House—a major in History and Political Science. Austin was a major in International Relations and

TO HONORS PEOPLE EVERYWHERE

French. She was five feet eleven inches tall with an irrepressible spirit. Shelley majored in engineering and was among their best. Heidi also majored in International Relations. I find myself uneasy with reporting numbers. The loss to the University is so much greater than thirty-three dead.

On Tuesday, the University responded with convocation. The President, the Governor, Senators, and Representative state legislators came, and we were grateful. Their visit to the campus proved helpful. But it was one of our own, Nikki Giovanni, who captured the moment, the sadness, the human will to prevail, and the bonding of community. The Virginia Tech homepage gives access to a site labeled "Detailed information available in our April 16 Tribute Section." If you click on that, it will take you to a site that has Nikki's reading. I encourage listening to it.

Classes were suspended for the week and many students went home. The ones that remained on campus endured the week as best they could. Our biggest problem proved to be the efforts by some to find blame in the University administration and University police for things not done. There will be an investigation concerning the response to the shootings. We need to learn all we can, but the campus community supports the efforts made. The horror was so great that the need to blame, to find fault, seemed palpable. We are proud of the students who, when goaded to be critical, maintained the grace to focus on the victims.

I am also newly aware of the power of tragedy to bring a resurgence of community. Last week, we lived in an orange and maroon world. Acts of kindness became ordinary. Looking out for one another simply the norm. It continues with even greater intensity this week with the students returning to class. Despite the option to end the semester now, most students returned and faculty are reporting classes with ninety percent attendance. Most are well over fifty percent. I have seen students consoling faculty members and faculty members not afraid to show emotion in class. Many faculty members seek students having difficulty and assist them. Nikki Giovanni's "We will prevail" becomes a reality before our very eyes.

Those in Honors know that community extends beyond physical borders. As I wrote this, the florist delivered a beautiful basket with a variety of plant life. It graces the table in our living room. The Calhoun Honors College at Clemson sent a gigantic card from the students there to the students here. A huge banner from the honors students at North Carolina State followed this. Both are filled with care and compassion. Students seem to be reading every entry.

Three alums, Mark Embree, Sarah Airey, and Ashley White, are flying in this weekend. Mark graduated in 1996 and studied for a doctorate at Oxford and is currently on the faculty at Rice University. Sarah (2001) and Ashley

(2005) are both doing doctorates at Cambridge University. They were coming to Tech to assist with the kickoff of the public phase of our capital campaign. When that event was cancelled, they wrote to say that were coming to be with students and faculty members. I look forward (for the first time in over a week) to something on campus.

Today was the funeral of the last of the Honors student to be buried. Leslie's service was held at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria, Virginia. It is a five-hour drive from Blacksburg. The level of care among faculty and students is confirmed by the fact that two Honors staff and forty-five students from Main Campbell House drove the ten hours to "be there for Leslie" one more time. We have lost much, but out of all this we have gained.

Maybe in the not to distant future, we can apply reason to the events here. I hope so. In the meantime, know that your expressions of kindness will long be remembered and appreciated by us all.

Cordially,
Jack

[Jack's column below is reprinted here with permission of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, for which we are very grateful. Eds.]

All Have Seen the Treasure of the University: Its People

Sunday, Apr 22, 2007—12:05 AM

Blacksburg. We come to know, if we are perceptive enough, how truly wealthy we are. In the wake of extreme tragedy, television reporters aired interviews with dozens of Virginia Tech students. These interviews revealed the intelligence, the courage, the grace, and the deep kindness that those of us at this university have grown to appreciate on a daily basis. The generosity of spirit on this campus (and on other campuses) is always present and often overwhelming.

Universities often try (with uneven success) to let the world in on our secret: The treasure is the people. As student after student stepped onto the international stage, the great wealth of this nation came into clear focus for all to see.

The price was too high.

The cost of this attention was 33 students and faculty members dead and 29 other students wounded. Families ripped asunder, dreams destroyed,

ALL HAVE SEEN THE TREASURE OF THE UNIVERSITY: ITS PEOPLE

talent obliterated, knowledge lost—all of this and more make this a moment of horror that will be long part of all our lives.

As the gunman took his own life, he robbed us of parts of our future.

What Might Have Been

Universities deal in the future. The passing of knowledge from one generation to the next forms the core of our lives. When that future is stolen, we measure the costs in what might have been.

Among the first messages I received late Monday were two from Syracuse University. The dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and the director of Syracuse's Honors Program wrote with perception—recalling that the Pan Am Flight 103 explosion over Scotland had taken more than 35 of their students on December 21, 1988. They indicated the continuing presence of that event in the life of the campus.

Just so, the events of April 16 will become part of the lore of Virginia Tech.

Events such as this are not overcome but must, by sheer enormity, weave themselves into the very fabric of the institution. The test of our greatness is our growth in the generosity with which we give to the world. Whatever grace we find is the gift of the 32 who died to provide the opportunity.

Alumni and friends from around the world have sent messages of concern, consolation, and care. Virginia Tech is blessed with engaged alumni. Their concern transcends the notes they send. We know that should we call, they would come. A university cannot ask for more than continued association with its students.

Many on this campus knew the fallen. Despite its size, Virginia Tech acts very much as a small community of people.

I knew several of the students and three of the faculty who died. They were committed to their studies, hardworking, and caring. They were fun people to know and always had something interesting to say. Their loss will disrupt the conversation that defines Virginia Tech, and their voices will be missed.

Even though a new freshman class is preparing to enter Virginia Tech this fall, there will be 32 empty places in our classrooms and not even 5,000 new students can replace them.

Coping With the Enormity

As I write these words Thursday morning it has been a scant 72 hours since the horror first became visible. We are reeling as we try to comprehend its enormity and its meaning to the university. How will we get through the very end of the spring semester? How will we assist students in completing the work of this session? Will we change summer orientation for new stu-

CHARLES (JACK) DUDLEY

dents? What accommodations to a new and more dangerous world must we make in the future? How can we stay the open and welcoming place we are even as we increase our efforts at security? There are administrators, faculty, and students debating such issues even now. Decisions are being made, and the university seeks to bring some degree of order out of chaos so profound that it is hard to imagine the idea of order itself.

When this ordeal began many of us found that there were simply no words sufficient to the world we found in Blacksburg. As students and faculty struggled, it was left to a resident poet to find those words for us. Nikki Giovanni holds a high place in the honored professors on this campus. She ended our memorial convocation on Tuesday with the following:

“We will continue to invent the future through our blood and tears and through all our sadness. We are the Hokies. We will prevail. We will prevail. We will prevail. We are Virginia Tech.”

Charles Dudley, a professor of sociology at Virginia Tech, is the director of the University Honors Program.

